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AUTHOR Berndt, Thomas J.
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ABSTRACT

Data from a recent study of potential effects of friends' characteristics and friendship features on students' adjustment to school are used to illustrate the distinction between two contradictory assumptions about the path of peer influence. The first assumption, which is linked to the work of Bronfenbrenner, takes a negative view, and focuses on the friends' own characteristics, especially their attitudes and behavior. The second assumption, a positive view of peer influence attributed to Piaget and Sullivan, focuses on the features of the friendships. Positive features of friendship include intimacy, trust, and prosocial behavior, while negative features include conflict and rivalry. Subjects of the study were over 300 students from 5th, 8th, and 11th grades. Data suggest that the first pathway incompletely describes friends' influence. Close and supportive friendships have positive effects on attitudes and behavior at school. Data also suggest that attention should be given to the negative features of friendship. Findings support these hypotheses: (1) the features of children's and adolescents' friendships have a greater impact on some aspects of adjustment than on others; and (2) age changes in the impact of friendship features vary across aspects of adjustment. (RH)

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Two pathways of friends' influence: Description and developmental changes

Thomas J. Berndt

Purdue University

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Two pathways of friends' influence: Description and developmental changes

Many researchers and theorists have assumed that friends have a powerful influence on the attitudes, and behavior of children and adolescents. Yet, there is considerable disagreement and even contention about how this influence operates and what effects it has. One view of peer influence that is accepted by many researchers, theorists, and parents can be illustrated--or, perhaps, caricatured--by the following fictional vignette.

Joe, who is 15 years old and in the ninth grade, got a phone call one evening from his friend Mike. Mike said that he and a few other friends were having a party at his house because his parents were out for the evening. He invited Joe to come over and Joe agreed. When Joe arrived, he found Mike and the friends smoking marijuana and acting kind of crazy. Mike asked Joe if he wanted a smoke. When Joe hesitated, Mike said, "What's the matter? Are you afraid of it?" The other kids said, "Come on, get high, it's really wild." So Joe sat down and started smoking along with the other kids.

Other theorists and researchers propose a radically different view of peer influence. Actually, this alternative view is accepted by many adults who, on occasion, espouse the first view. The prototypical features of the alternative view can again be illustrated by a fictional vignette.

Mary, who is 14 years old and in the eighth grade, came home one Friday evening after cheerleading practice to find her parents in a big argument. Her parents quarrel often, but this time they were really shouting and her mother started throwing things. Mary left the house as soon as she could and went over to the home of her best friend, Jane. Jane invited Mary up to her room and they talked for hours about how hard it is to live with parents sometimes, and how to handle it when parents are fighting. When Mary went home, she felt much better and thought there were some things that she could do that might help her parents get along with each other.

Perhaps the most obvious difference between the two vignettes is the apparent effect of friends' influence. In the first vignette, this influence led to Joe's initiation into the use of illicit drugs. In the second vignette, her friend's influence helped Mary to understand better the stressful events in her life and helped her cope more successfully with the problems in her family. In more general terms, the two vignettes contrast negative and positive effects of friends' influence.

The negative view of friends' influence exemplified in the first vignette has a long history. Many psychologists link this view to the research and writing of Urie Bronfenbrenner (e.g., 1970a, 1970b) on adolescents' responses to peer pressure. Recently, many researchers have used similar ideas to explain adolescents' drug use (e.g., Brook, Whiteman, & Gordon, 1983), delinquent or antisocial behavior (e.g., Steinberg & Silverberg, 1986), and antagonism toward school (e.g., Ball, 1981). The positive view of peer influence exemplified in the second

vignette originated with Piaget (1932/1965) and Sullivan (1953). Related ideas have been presented in more recent writings on the contributions of close and supportive friendships to social adjustment and psychological development (Berndt, 1982, 1989; Rubin, 1980).

Few writers have given serious attention to the apparent contradiction between the two views of friends' influence. I believe the most important difference between the two views is not in their assumptions about the outcomes of friends' influence, but in their assumptions about pathways of influence. The vignette about Joe and Michael emphasizes what I will call the first pathway of influence. This pathway focuses on the friends' own characteristics, especially their attitudes and behavior. If a friend's attitudes and behavior are socially desirable, that friend is likely to have a positive influence on a child or adolescent. If the friend's attitudes and behavior are not socially desirable, he or she is likely to have a negative influence.

The vignette about Mary and Jane emphasizes what I will call the second pathway of influence. This pathway focuses on the features of the friendships between children or adolescents. If these friendships have many positive features--such as intimacy, trust, and prosocial behavior--then they are likely to have a positive influence on children and adolescents. If the friendships have many negative features, for example, they are marred by frequent conflicts and rivalry, then they are likely to have a negative influence.

In this talk, I will use data from a recent study to illustrate and elaborate on the distinction between the two pathways of influence. My co-workers and I designed the study to examine the potential effects

of friends' characteristics and friendship features on various aspects of students' adjustment to school. Because we included three age groups in the study, I can present some evidence on age changes in the importance of the two pathways of influence. The evidence is only suggestive, however, because the study had a strictly correlational design. Thus I can speak more confidently about the relations between the friendship and adjustment measures than about the causal influence of friendships on adjustment. I should also warn you that I will give only a general outline of the methods for the study. If you have questions about the details of the measures or procedures, please feel free to ask after my talk or during the question period at the end.

The study included over 300 students from the fifth, eighth, and eleventh grades. The sample constituted roughly 90% of the students in these grades in a small town. The students completed two sets of questionnaires. During a first session, they answered questions about several facets of their attitudes toward school, their classroom behavior, their educational aspirations, and their self-concepts. I will focus on two of these measures today. First, students reported their involvement in their schoolwork in response to questions such as "How often do you take part in class discussions?" Second, students reported on their disruptive behavior in class in response to questions such as "How often do you annoy or bother other classmates?" In addition, the students' English and math teachers indicated the grades that each student received in their subjects on the last report card. Average grades across both subjects served as another measure of school adjustment that I will discuss.

During a second session, students described the positive features of their relationships with up to three best friends. We asked about three positive features: intimacy, prosocial behavior, and self-esteem support. To judge the intimacy of these friendships, we used questions such as "How often do you tell this friend things that you wouldn't tell most kids?". To judge friends' prosocial behavior, we asked questions like "If you asked this friend to do a favor for you, how often would he or she agree to do so?"). To judge friends' support for each other's self-esteem, we used questions such as "When you don't do well on something, how often does this friend make you feel better about yourself?".

We also asked about two negative features of these friendships: conflicts (e.g., "How often does this friend annoy or bug you?") and rivalry (e.g., "How often does this friend show off or act like he or she is better than you?"). Then we computed mean scores across each set of questions for the positive and negative features of each student's friendships.

We also asked students to describe their impressions of their friends' involvement in school and disruptive behavior. With these data, we could see whether students perceived their friends' adjustment to school as similar to their own. Because most students named friends who were also participating in the study, we also obtained measures of the actual similarity in adjustment of students and their friends.

The measures of similarity are important for evaluating the impact of the first pathway of influence, the effects of friends' characteristics. Although many writers implicitly refer to this pathway

of influence when arguing for negative effects of friends on children and adolescents, these references are inaccurate and misleading. Friends' influence cannot be treated as unequivocally negative, because the influence operating during friends' interactions reflects a mutual process. In the first vignette, I described Mike and his friends as convincing Joe to smoke marijuana. Under some conditions, however, Joe might convince Mike and his friends to quit smoking marijuana. To account for both possibilities, we must assume that friends are influenced by and influence each other. This mutual process leads, over time, to an increase in the friends' similarity. Thus the similarity between friends can be taken as an approximate index of their influence on each other.

There is a problem however, with using similarity measures as indices of influence. There measures are also affected by biases in selection of friends. To a degree, children and adolescents choose friends who are already similar to themselves in their attitudes and behavior. This bias in friendship selection must be taken into account when interpreting data on friends' similarity.

Table 1 shows the correlations between students and their friends for the three primary measures of school adjustment. The correlations between students' self-reports and their reports on their friends are shown under the heading, perceived similarity. The correlations between students' self-reports and the friends' own self-reports are shown under the heading, actual similarity.

Insert Table 1 about here.

I want to comment first on the actual similarity correlations. Actual similarity in involvement was greatest at 8th grade and was nonsignificant at 11th grade. Actual similarity in disruption was also greatest at eighth grade and nonsignificant at 11th grade. These findings suggest a developmental change in the importance of the first pathway of influence, the effects of friends' characteristics. At least for school adjustment, influence via this pathway seems most powerful at 8th grade, slightly weaker at 5th grade, and unimportant at 11th grade. Previous research with other measures also suggests a decrease in friends' influence near the end of adolescence (Berndt, 1979; Brown, Clasen, & Eicher, 1986). This decrease seems to be due to the emergence of true autonomy in late adolescence.

The additional correlations in Table 1 strengthen the conclusion regarding a developmental change in the influence of friends' characteristics. First, friends' actual similarity in report-card grades did not change significantly between 5th and 11th grade. Students similar in grades are often placed in the same classes and, therefore, are likely to select each other as friends. The lack of changes in friends' similarity in report-card grades suggests that this selection bias changes little during adolescence. Thus the fluctuations across grade levels in actual similarity in involvement and disruption are likely to reflect more than friendship selection.

Second, the correlations for perceived similarity to friends are comparable across grade levels and measures. This comparability bolsters the conclusion that conscious processes of friendship selection cannot account for the age changes in actual similarity. In particular, 11th graders thought their friends were similar to them in involvement

and disruption when there was actually little similarity between them and their friends. The difference between perceived and actual similarity at 11th grade also strengthens the conclusion that the age trend for actual similarity reflects a real change in the influence of friends' characteristics.

Table 2 shows the correlations between the measures of positive friendship features and school adjustment. To our surprise, students' reports on the positive features of their friendships were significantly correlated with their adjustment to school only at 8th grade. Eighth graders who described their friendships as closer and more supportive also said they were more involved in school and less disruptive. They also had higher report-card grades.

Insert Table 2 about here.

Table 3 shows the correlations between the measures of negative friendship features and school adjustment. The correlation of negative features with disruptive behavior was significant at 5th and 8th grade. The students at these grades who reported they had more conflicts and rivalry with friends also reported that they were more disruptive in school. Note that these correlations are not consistent with a hypothesis advanced by some theorists that students alienated from adults will form good relationships with friends. Rather, problems with adults at school and problems with best friends seem to go together.

Insert Table 3 about here.

The correlations for positive and negative features imply a developmental change in friends' influence via the second pathway. They suggest that friendship features may have their greatest effect on school adjustment at 8th grade, a more limited effect at 5th grade, and little effect at 11th grade. No major theorist has suggested such an age trend. Most theorists imply that friendship features have more effect as friendships themselves become more important in the lives of children and adolescents. In our study, as in previous research, older adolescents perceived their friendships more positively than younger adolescents did. There was not a significant age change in perceptions of the negative features of friendship. Nonetheless, the relation of positive friendship features to school adjustment was stronger in middle adolescence than in late adolescence.

The changing correlations for friendship features may show that friendships are less closely linked to behavior in the school context in late adolescence than in middle adolescence. Perhaps friendship features are more strongly related to other aspects of adjustment, for example, identity development, in late adolescence than earlier. We will need additional research on the second pathway of influence to examine this hypothesis.

Conclusions

To sum up, I want to return briefly to the vignettes with which I began. In retrospect, we can conclude that the vignette concerning Joe and Mike describes one pathway of friends' influence, that involving the effects of friends' characteristics, but it does so incompletely. To fill out the picture, we need to acknowledge that influence in friendship groups is a mutual process. Joe influences Mike as well as

vice versa. The result of this process is an increase in friends' similarity in attitudes and behavior. This increase is not always due to children's adolescents' conformity to friends who engage in undesirable behaviors. Rather, it derives from a mutual accommodation that apparently leads as often to desirable as to undesirable behavior. The vignette was correct on one important detail, however: it focused on friends' influence in middle adolescence. During middle adolescence, the mutual influence of friends on each other's attitudes and behavior does seem to be greater than in late adolescence, and perhaps greater than in early adolescence.

The vignette concerning Mary and Jane appears, in retrospect, to illustrate important elements of the second pathway of influence, the effects of friendship features. The findings of our study add to knowledge of this influence pathway by suggesting that close and supportive friendships have positive effects on attitudes and behavior at school. Our findings also suggest a need for attention to the negative features of friendship. Adolescents who have frequent conflicts with their friends are also likely to have conflicts with adults. Finally, the vignette points to a limitation in current information about the second pathway of influence. We now know that friendship features are related to school adjustment in early and middle adolescence. We know little about the impact of friendship features on other aspects of adjustment, such as the family problems that Mary faced. We must, I think, entertain the hypotheses that (1) the features of children's and adolescents' friendships have a greater impact on certain aspects of adjustment than others; and (2) age changes in the impact of friendship features vary across aspects of adjustment.

Testing these general hypotheses and giving them greater specificity will take years of research. Yet only by doing this research can we acquire an accurate understanding of the effects of friendships in childhood and adolescence.

PERCEIVED AND ACTUAL SIMILARITY OF FRIENDS AT THREE GRADES

	Perceived Similarity			Actual Similiarity		
	5th	8th	11th	5th	8th	11th
Involvement	.38***	.49***	.38***	.32**	.43***	.04
Disruption	.50***	.50***	.38***	.22*	.42***	.16
Grades	-	-	-	.37***	.43***	.32**

*p<.05. **p <.01. ***p<.001.

RELATION OF POSITIVE FRIENDSHIP FEATURES TO FRIENDS' ADJUSTMENT AT THREE GRADES

	Grade		
	5th	8th	11th
Involvement	.07	.23*	-.03
Disruption	-.01	-.35***	-.05
Grades	.02	.19*	.11

RELATIONS OF NEGATIVE FRIENDSHIP FEATURES TO SCHOOL ADJUSTMENT AT THREE GRADES

	Grade		
	5th	8th	11th
Involvement	-.16	-.15	.09
Disruption	.43***	.34***	.17
Grades	-.17	-.09	.00